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ABSTRACT

This action research study examined what writing strategy, process writing approach, free, or informal writing, was the most effective with students with learning disabilities. Five students (ages 13-15) in a self-contained eighth grade language arts class were observed while they learned the three different writing strategies. The process writing approach is an instructional technique in which the learner is taught to focus attention on the writing process rather than on the product. Students with learning disabilities are assigned a writing task that is meaningful to them and taught to write using a process approach. The process writing approach involves a series of stages including a pre-write, draft, revision, and publication. Publishing the paper is one of the most important steps to enable students to feel proud of their work. The information collected found that the process writing approach was the most effective writing strategy. Results also found the students with learning disabilities preferred to use informal writing or free writing, rather than the process writing approach. This suggests that although students with learning disabilities have a writing preference (free writing), they learn how to write using the process writing approach. Appendices include survey instruments. (CR)

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Running head: EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT WRITING STRATEGIES

What Writing Strategy Process, Free or Informal, is the Most Effective for Students with Learning Disabilities?

Amy Marie Wojasinski and Denise M. Smith

Paper presented at the

Second Annual Special Education Classroom Action Research Conference

South Bend, IN

April 27, 2002

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Introduction

This action research study examined what writing strategy, process writing approach, free, or informal writing, was the most effective with students with learning disabilities. The questions posed were: (1)What writing strategy, process, free, or informal, is the most effective for students with learning disabilities? (2 What is the preferred writing strategy, process, free, or informal, for students with learning disabilities? Writing needs to be incorporated in the everyday learning process in order for students with disabilities to examine their ideas, reflect on what was learned, and extend their understanding of the subject matter. Five students were observed while they learned the three different writing strategies. The information collected found that the process writing approach was the most effective writing strategy. Also students with learning disabilities prefer to use informal writing or free rather than process writing approach. This suggests that although students have a writing preference, that is free writing, they learn how to write using the process writing approach.

Literature Review

Writing is a way for many to express and understand themselves it connects their lives and extends into other avenues. It serves many purposes including entertainment, explanation, persuasion, and personal expression. Writing is one of the most complex and important of academic abilities in a life for a student with a disability (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Students with specific writing difficulties usually fail to make the expected academic progress associated with their chronological age and intelligence (Lie, O'Hare, & Denwood, 2000). Many students with learning disabilities experience a cycle of frustration, loss of self-esteem, and motivation in which they fall farther behind

academically. When they matriculate to middle and high school, most students with learning disabilities have experienced years of frustration with writing (Alber, 2001). Process, free, and informal writing are three writing strategies that are utilized in classrooms. Each strategy has different techniques and implications to facilitate the learning process of the student with the learning disability.

The process writing approach is an instructional technique in which the learner is taught to focus attention on the writing process rather than on the product (Alber, 2001). Students with learning disabilities are assigned a writing task that is meaningful to them and taught to write using a process approach; they make greater gains in the quality of their narrative and informative writing. The process writing approach involves a series of stages including a pre-write, draft, revision, and publication. In the pre-write stage, the students gather and organize ideas. Drafting involves writing sentences and paragraphs from the pre-write stage. The next stage, revision, involves finding strengths and weaknesses on what was written. Publishing the paper is one of the most important steps especially when working with students who have disabilities. Students need to feel proud of their work and should display it in the classroom or portfolio. When students have the opportunity to share their work, they begin to understand that writing is communication.

The process writing approach has demonstrated to be an effective strategy for increasing quality in student writing (Alber, 2001). Students with learning disabilities have difficulty producing mechanically correct writing, organizing thoughts, generating ideas, and producing coherent writing. The process writing approach allows students with disabilities to share a message with an audience while engaging in guided practice of

organization, grammar, and spelling skills (McAlister, Nelson, & Bahr, 1999). Students who have learning disabilities can especially benefit from the process writing approach because it works with individual needs and assists in the writing methods.

Free writing is another strategy used to aid students with disabilities' writing. Free writing is a timed writing activity that encourages the student to write in a stream of unconsciousness mind. The main objective in free writing is to capture as many thoughts and ideas as possible and allow the writing to flow wherever their minds lead them. They are not to be concerned about errors. Several days in the classroom can be allocated to allow students to write on any given topic while on other days the teacher can direct the topic.

Informal writing is a strategy commonly used among teachers. Informal writing is a point of view paper or a letter to a politician or newspaper. Students using informal writing needs to think critically and organize thoughts and ideas. Informal writing is a means to communicate effectively among family, friends, or community. When using informal writing, students should express their thoughts clearly and precisely.

Participants

Five students with learning disabilities (3 female African-Americans; 2 male, Caucasians) participated in this action research study. The students were in a self-contained eighth grade language arts class. The ages of the students ranged from 13-15 years of age. These students were selected to participate in this action research study based on their disability, race, gender, and attendance. The language arts class is an 80-minute period with a five-minute break after the first 40 minutes of instruction. The

school is unique in that it is an eighth grade building for the district and is located in northwest Indiana. There are approximately 525 students in the building. Twenty one percent of the population consist of students with special needs. This is the first year that the building has housed eighth grade students exclusively. The teachers are divided into three academic teams and one auxiliary.

Materials

Teacher and student surveys were utilized in this study (see Appendices A & B). Writing rubrics and assessment summary were used and developed by the school corporation where the study was conducted (see Appendices C & D). The rubric was developed based upon the Indiana Standards by the school corporation (see Appendix E).

Procedure

Students with learning disabilities were informed that they would be writing in three different formats: the process writing approach, informal and free writing. Each strategy was used in a 10 week period. They were asked to write on three different occasions, using one of the writing strategies indicated by the teacher. Each writing strategy was evaluated using a rubric with five categories: voice, style, ideas and content, organization and language in use (see Appendix C). Each score of the students was marked on the assessment summary for each category (see Appendix D).

The process writing approach occured over four consecutive days. Students were asked to write about their interests and hobbies they enjoyed during or after school. On the first day students brainstormed by drawing webs, outlines, and writing notes in the

pre-write stage. This took approximately 15-20 minutes. The next day the students began to write their essays in a rough draft format. This took approximately 45-50 minutes. Revision is the next step, in which students exchanged papers among peers and myself for corrections. This took 50 minutes. The final day the students wrote their final copy, this took 45 minutes.

The next writing strategy used in the language arts class was free writing. The topic directed for free writing was "What is on your mind?" The students wrote freely for the selected time for two days. Informal writing was the final strategy that students used for in this study. The students were asked to write a letter to the principal or assistant principal about their opinions of the school. This writing strategy lasted 40-45 minutes.

After all three strategies were explained and utilized in the classroom a student survey was distributed in class (see Appendix B). Thirteen language arts students with disabilities completed the survey. Each member of the class completed a survey in order for the preferred writing strategy to be determined for the entire class. The entire class was involved in the survey because they have experienced each of the writing strategies over the course of the semester. It also helped track the students with disabilities feelings on their writing. The students answered yes or no questions about writing. Finally, a survey was given to six special education teachers in the building. Each teacher answered a series of questions on writing and his/her beliefs by answering yes or no (see Appendix A).

Results

Three writing strategies, writing process approach, free, and informal were reviewed. Using the process writing approach, students with learning disabilities demonstrated most proficient skills in writing using the process writing approach (see Table 3). In voice, ideas, and content the students with learning disabilities were 60% proficient in the categories. They demonstrated adequate skills in these areas based on the rubric that was used (see Appendix C). Students with learning disabilities, using the process writing approach, have the highest language in use skills percent, 36.66%, compared to informal with only 30% and 23.33% in free writing. As shown in Table 3, student organization while using the writing process approach was the highest among the other writing strategies. Students organized their ideas logically compared to informal and free writing.

The students with learning disabilities were weakest in free writing. Their organization, style, and language in use skills were below average. Ideas, content, and voice were average. Language in use skills (23.33%) in free writing was the lowest in all three writing strategies. Students with learning disabilities stayed focused somewhat on the topic but only included minimal ideas and information. Informal writing had comparable scores to the writing process approach. Once again ideas, content, and voice were average. Organization, style, and language in use were below average.

A survey was distributed to the self-contained special education language arts class. All students responded to the surveys. Results from the survey indicated that 69.23% of the students prefer to write, despite teachers using writing as a form of punishment (84.61%). As shown in Table 2, only 23% of the students like to use the

Table 3. Writing Results

Item	Process Writing Approach	Informal	Free Writing
Voice	60%	56.66%	46.66%
Ideas & Content	60%	56.66%	46.66%
Organization	46.66%	33.33%	33.33%
Style	43.33%	33.33%	26.66%
Language in Use	36.66%	30%	23.33%

Table 2. Student Writing Survey

Item	Yes	No
1. Do you like to write?	69.23%	30.76%
2. Do you like to use the writing process approach (pre-write, draft revise and publish)?	23%	76.92%
3. Do you like to free write in a journal?	76.92%	23%
4. Do you like to write letters or brochures to friends or companies?	76.92%	23%
5. Do you feel you are a creative writer?	53.84%	46.15%
6. Do you feel that you write with correct grammar and mechanics in all your papers?	38.46%	61.53%
7. Has a teacher ever used writing as a form of punishment?	84.61%	15.38%
8. Do you feel you are a good writer?	53.84%	46.15%
9. Do you feel you're a poor writer who needs improvement?	53.84%	46.15%
10. Are you learning more about writing as you continue school?	84.61%	15.38%

writing process approach while 76.92% prefer free writing or informal writing. Most of the students with learning disabilities in the survey believed that they do not write with correct grammar or mechanics and need to improve in their writing skills. Fifty three percent of the students with learning disabilities believed that they are creative and good writers.

Another survey was distributed to six special education teachers. All surveys were returned. Table 1 presents a cumulative response for each question. The special education teachers have their students write weekly. All of the special education teachers believe that students with learning disabilities lack skills needed in writing. The teachers provide immediate feedback 83.33% of the time on student's writing in order for the student with disabilities to see what positive and negative skills he/she has accomplished. However, teachers varied in what writing strategies they use in their classroom. For example, only 50% of teachers use informal writing in their classrooms whereas 83.33% use the process writing approach. The process writing approach allows the student to write step-by-step. Most of the teachers surveyed enjoy teaching writing (83.33%) in their classroom.

Implications or Interpretations

The data collected answers the action research questions: What writing strategy, process, free, or informal, is the most effective for students with learning disabilities? What is the preferred writing strategy, process, free, or informal, for students with learning disabilities? The process writing approach was the most effective writing

Table 1. Teacher Writing Survey

Item	Yes	No
1. Do your students write in the classroom every week?	100%	0%
2. Do you use the process writing approach in your classroom?	83.33%	16.66%
3. Do you use free writing (journal, creative) in your classroom?	66.66%	33.33%
4. Do you use informal writing (letters) in your classroom?	50%	50%
5. Do the students respond positively to writing?	0%	100%
6. Do you feel the students are strong in their writing skills?	0%	100%
7. Do you use writing as a form of punishment?	0%	100%
8. Do you motivate students to write in class by providing positive reinforcement?	83.33%	16.66%
9. Do you provide immediate feedback in their writing selections?	83.33%	16.66%
10. Do you enjoy teaching writing skills to students?	83.33%	16.66%

strategy for students with learning disabilities. These findings support the process writing approach being an effective strategy for increasing quality in student writing (Alber, 2001). The process writing approach allows students with disabilities to share a message with an audience while engaging in guided practice of organization, spelling and grammar skills (McAlister, Nelson, & Bahr, 1999). Students were not receptive of the process writing approach. During the first days they were argumentative, disruptive and not goal oriented. As the days passed and their writing developed their attitudes became more receptive.

While the students wrote freely on any given topic during free writing, there were approximately four phone interruptions during this time. The students were quite but their eyes roamed around the room. They did not complain and were positive about free writing. This was the first day back after two snow days. The students being studied appeared to have no problems or concerns that day. The final strategy, informal writing, was explained and a topic was given. The students were quiet for the first 25 minutes but became talkative for the remainder of the period. They were interested and not argumentative. There were six interruptions for that period. However, students did not appear to have any concerns or problems.

Another finding from this study suggested that teachers use the process writing approach more in their classrooms than informal writing or free writing. Teachers have been more adequately trained on this approach in the school system. Several professional days had been dedicated to the process writing approach. Perhaps, teachers do not feel comfortable using informal writing or free writing because of their lack of training and understanding. However, it should be noted that students with learning

disabilities indicated a preference for using free or informal writing verses the process writing approach. This suggests that teachers will need to consider using the process as well as the free style writing techniques.

In summary, this action research examined three writing strategies: process, formal, and informal. Results suggest that students with learning disabilities were more successful when using the process writing approach; however, they preferred the informal (or "free") writing approach. Teachers may need to emphasize the importance of "structure" when writing so that students can improve their writing skills.

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Appendix A – Teacher Survey

Directions: Please check Yes or No.	Yes	No
2. Do your students write in the classroom every week?		
2. Do you use the process writing approach in your classroom?		
3. Do you use free writing (journal, creative) in your classroom?		
4. Do you use informal writing (letters) in your classroom?		
5. Do the student respond positively to writing?		
6. Do you feel the students are strong in their writing skills?		
7. Do you use writing as a form of punishment?		
8. Do you motivate students to write in class by providing positive reinforcement?		
9. Do you provide immediate feedback in their writing selections?		
10. Do you enjoy teaching writing skills to students?		

Appendix B – Student Survey

Directions: Please circle Yes or No to each question.

1. Do you like to write? Yes No
2. Do you like to use the writing process approach (pre-write, draft, revise and publish)? Yes No
3. Do you like to free write in a journal? Yes No
4. Do you like to write letters or brochures to friends or companies? Yes No
5. Do you feel you are a creative writer? Yes No
6. Do you feel that you write with correct grammar and mechanics in all your papers? Yes No
7. Has a teacher ever used writing as a form of punishment? Yes No
8. Do you feel you are a good writer? Yes No
9. Do you feel your a poor writer who needs improvement? Yes No
10. Are you learning more about writing as you continue school? Yes No

Appendix C

Score Level	Ideas and Content
6	**Writer stays completely focused on topic and task.** -Writer uses unifying theme or main idea. -Writer does not go off on tangents. -Writer fully accomplishes the task. **Writer includes thorough and complete ideas and information.** -Writer addressess all of the specific points of the prompt. -Writer give in-depth information and exceptional supporting details that are fully developed. -Writer fully explores many facets of the topic.
5	**Writer stays focused on topic and task.** -Writer uses unifying theme or main idea. -Writer does not go off on tangents. -Writer fully accomplishes the task. **Writer includes many relevant ideas and information.** -Writer addressess all of the specific points of the prompt. -Writer give in-depth information and exceptional supporting details that are fully developed. -Writer fully explores many facets of the topic.
4	**Writer stays mostly focused on topic and task.** -Writer presents a main idea but may get briefly distracted. -Writer accomplishes the task. **Writer includes many relevant ideas and information.** -Writer addresses most of the specific points of the prompt. -Writer gives supporting details but details may not be developed. Ideas may be listed. -Writer explores some facets of the topic.
3	**Writer stays somewhat focused on topic and task.** -Writer attempts a main idea, but may lose focus. -Writer may only minimally accomplish the task. **Writer includes minimally relevant ideas and information.** -Writer addresses some of the specific points of the prompt. -Writer gives minimal details,may list ideas without supporting details. -Writer may explore few facets of the topic.
2	**Writer exhibits less than minimal focus on topic and task.** -Writer attempts a main idea, but generally loses focus. -Writer less than adequately accomplishes the particular task. **Writer includes few relevent ideas or little information.** -Writer may have ideas that go off in several directions. -Writer may glave little information. -Writer may omit details or include unrelated details.
1	**Writer has little or no focus on topic and task.** -It may be unclear to the reader what the writer is trying to communicate. -Writer does not accomplish the particular task. **Writer includes very few relevant ideas or information.** -Writer gives little information and/or details.

Appendix C

Score Level	Style
6	**Writer exhibits exceptional word usage.** -Writer chooses vocabulary to make explanations detailed and precise descriptions rich, and actions clear and vivid Writer demonstrates control of a challenging vocabulary **Writer demonstrates exceptional writing technique.** -Writing is fluent and easy to read Writer uses varied sentence patterns and complex sentences Writer uses writer's techniques (i.e., literary conventions such as imagery and dialogue and/or literary genres such as humor and suspense)
5	**Writer exhibits more than adequate word usage.** -Writer chooses vocabulary to make explanations detailed and precise descriptions rich, and actions clear and vivid Writer demonstrates control of vocabulary **Writer demonstrates more than adequate writing technique.** -Writing is fluent and easy to read Writer uses varied sentence patterns,may use complex sentences -Writer uses writer's techniques(i.e., literary conventions such as imagery and dialogue and/or literary genres such as humor and suspsense)
4	**Writer exhibits adquate word usage.** -Writer uses ordinary vocabulary, chooses words that are predictable and common Writer demonstrates some control of vocabulary **Writer demonstrates adequate writing techniques.** -Writing uses language that is easy to read although a lapse may occur -Writer uses some varied sentence patterns may use some complex sentences -Writer may attempt to use writer's techniques(i.e., literary conventions such as imagery and dialogue and/or literary genres such as humor and suspense)
3	**Writer exhibits minimal word usage.** -Writer uses limited vocabulary,chooses words that are predictable and common -Writer demontrates minimal control of vocabulary. **Writer demonstrates minimal writing technique.** Writing may not be easy to read -Writing may be repetetive, predictable, or dull Writer relies mostly on simple sentences
2	**Writer exhibits less than minimal word usage.** -Writer uses limited vocabulary,may use words incorrectly Writer demonstrates less than minimal control of vocabulary **Writer demonstrates less than minimal writing technique.** -Writing may be difficult to read -Writing may be repetitive, predictable, or dull -Writing relies mostly on simple sentences
1	**Writer exhibits less than minimall word usage.** -Writer uses limited vocabulary,many words may be used incorrectly -Writer demonstrates less than minimal control of vocabulary **Writer demontrates less than minimal writing technique.** -Writer uses language that is difucult to read -Writer is flat and liteless -Writer has problems with sentence construction

Appendix C

Score Level	Voice
6	**Writer effectively adjusts language and tone to task and reader.** -Writer chooses appropriate register (i.e., formal, personal, or dialect) to suit task. -Writer displays strong sence of audience. -Writer has unique perspective may be original, authoritative, lively, and/or exciting.
5	**Writer effectively adjusts language and tone to task and reader.** -Writer chooses appropriate register (i.e., formal, personal, or dialect) to suit task. -Writer displays sence of audience. -Writer may have a unique perspective may be original, authoritative, lively, and/or exciting.
4	**Writer attempts to adjust language and tone to task and reader.** -Writer makes adjustments, but may occasionally slip out of register (i.e., formal, personal, or dialect). -Writer displays some sense of audience.
3	**Writer attempts to adjust language and tone to task and reader.** -Writer has difficulty establishing a register (i.e., formal, personal, or dialect). -Writer displays little sense of audience.
2	**Writer may use language and tone inappropriate to task and reader.** -Writer may not use an appropriate register (ie., uses slang or dialect in a formal setting).
1	**Writer may use language and tone inappropriate to task and reader.** -Writer may not use an appropriate register (i.e., uses slang or dialect in a formal setting).

Appendix C

Score Level	Writer must:
	Organization
6	-Organize ideas logically
5	-Organize ideas logically
4	-Organize ideas logically
3	-Attempts or organize ideas logically
2	-Does not organize ideas logically
1	-Does not organize ideas logically
	Language In Use
6	-Words have few or no capitalization errors -Sentences have few or no grammar errors -Words have few or not spelling errors -There are no errors that impair the flow of communication
5	-Words have few capitalization errors - Words have few spelling errors –Writing has few paragraphing errors -Sentences has few grammar or word usage errors
4	-Most capitalization is correct -Most punctuation is correct -Most spelling is correct -Errors are occasional but do not impede the flow of communication in the paper
3	-Most grammar and word usage is correct -Most paragraphing is correct -Writing may have run-on sentences or fragments -Most capitalization/punctuation is correct
2	-Writing exhibits a minimal command of

Appendix C

Language-in-Use Continued

2	-language skills -Some capitalization is correct -Some punctuation is correct -Some spelling is correct
1	-Writing exhibits a less than adequate command of language skills -Words have many capitalization errors -Sentences have many punctuation errors -Words have many spelling words -Writing may have sentence run-on or fragments

Appendix D

Teacher: _____ School: _____ Grade Level: _____

• List students' names, record their results in each column • Enter NA if student not assessed	Voice				Ideas & Content (4 = on grade level)				Organization (4 = on grade level)				Style (4 = on grade level)				Language-In-Use (3 = grade level)			
	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4
Pre/K Level 2 & 3G % of G 1 8+																				
% of G 2-5 4, 5, or 6																				
Average Scores																				

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Appendix E

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. READING: Word Recognition, Fluency, and Vocabulary Development

Students use their knowledge of word parts and word relationships, as well as context clues (the meaning of the text around a word), to determine the meaning of specialized vocabulary and to understand the precise meaning of grade-level-appropriate words.

2. READING: Reading Comprehension

Students read and understand grade-level-appropriate material. They describe and connect the essential ideas, arguments, and perspectives of the text by using their knowledge of text structure, organization, and purpose. At Grade 8, in addition to regular classroom reading, students read a variety of narrative (story) and expository (informational and technical) texts, including classic and contemporary literature, poetry, magazines, newspapers, reference materials, and online information.

3. READING: Literary Response and Analysis

Students read and respond to grade-level-appropriate historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their study of history and social science. They clarify the ideas and connect them to other literary works.

The selections in the **Indiana Reading List** (available online at www.doe.state.in.us/standards/readinglist.html) illustrate the quality and complexity of the materials to be read by students.

4. WRITING: Writing Process

Students discuss, list, and graphically organize writing ideas. They write clear, coherent, and focused essays. Students progress through the stages of the writing process and proofread, edit, and revise writing.

5. WRITING: Writing Applications

At Grade 8, students continue to write narrative (story), expository (informational), persuasive, and descriptive essays of at least 750 to 1,000 words. Students are introduced to writing technical documents. Student writing demonstrates a command of Standard English and the research, organizational, and drafting strategies outlined in Standard 4 — Writing Process. Writing demonstrates an awareness of the audience (intended reader) and purpose for writing.

6. WRITING: Written English Language Conventions

Students write using Standard English conventions appropriate to this grade level.

7. LISTENING AND SPEAKING: Listening and Speaking Skills, Strategies, and Applications

Students deliver focused, coherent presentations that convey ideas clearly and relate to the background and interests of the audience. They evaluate the content of oral communication. Students deliver well-organized formal presentations using traditional speech strategies, including narration, exposition, persuasion, and description. Students use the same Standard English conventions for oral speech that they use in their writing.

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